

The Detroit News

LIONS

Separated by just 6 miles, Lions quartet shaped by its 'Rocket City' roots

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Published 11:00 p.m. ET Aug. 15, 2020

While the Detroit Lions represent the Motor City, in the team's locker room, there's a growing Rocket City flavor. Perhaps that's fitting, given the astronomical odds of four players on the roster growing up and playing their high school ball in a six-mile radius.

In the current iteration of its ever-shifting personnel, the Lions have amassed four players — Trey Flowers, Kerryon Johnson, Reggie Ragland and rookie Logan Stenberg — from Huntsville, Alabama, or the encased town of Madison.

While undoubtedly coincidental, the four have common experiences, backgrounds and personality traits that brought them to the this point, the pinnacle of their profession, in a city more than 600 miles north, but one sharing an overlapping ethos with home.

In Huntsville, you'd be hard-pressed to find someone who hasn't heard of Ragland. He's a local legend bordering on athletic deity. From a early age, most anyone who saw him on a field or court knew he was destined for bigger things.

"Hell, everybody knew Reggie," Johnson said. "Reggie's been on the front page of The Huntsville Times since he was in the eighth grade, maybe younger."

And Ragland has largely met those lofty expectations placed on him since middle school. He won a state championship as a basketball player at Madison's Bob Jones High School, was a unanimous All-American linebacker at the University of Alabama, where he won three conference titles and national championships in 2012 and 2015. And even though that level of individual success has eluded him at the professional level — at least in part because of circumstances outside of his control — he's managed to add another ring to his jewelry collection, starting at linebacker for the Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl last year.

That's the kind of resume that gets your name put on a city's sign. "Welcome to Madison: Home of Reggie Ragland."

"Not yet," Ragland said, laughing.

But don't think Ragland's accomplishments have been lost on the city or mayor Paul Finley, whose sons played sports with all four of Huntsville-area Lions. After the Chiefs won the Super Bowl, Finley was exploring the possibility of throwing a parade for the town's star son, before a pandemic-sized wrench was hurled into the planning process.

"It's one of those things that it's that big of a deal for us," Finley said.

And while Ragland's legend looms large in Madison, in terms of high school accomplishments, Johnson did well to escape that shadow.

Before Johnson was a multi-sport star at Madison Academy, and even before Ragland had captured local headlines, Johnson's older brother Kerron was one of the brightest prep stars in the area, winning three state championships and earning the state's Mr. Basketball award in 2009.

Kerryon, like his brother, was a star basketball player. And like Ragland, Kerryon already was playing varsity in eighth grade, where he crossed paths with Flowers, then a senior at Columbia High School in Huntsville.

Flowers, the same now as he was back then, was quiet and serious. And according to Johnson, nearly as big. And although he doesn't quite remember the details, Flowers sent a message when the young upstart tried to drive the lane.

"He doesn't mean any harm by what he does, but you've got to realize, Trey has been the same size since his sophomore year of high school," Johnson said. "He's always been that big. I was in eighth grade, maybe 160 pounds soaking wet, and I drive down the lane and big ol' Trey, at center, is in there and freaking hammers me as I shoot a floater. I go to the ground. Obviously, I hop back up because that's what you need to do. He'll never remember it, because he didn't mean anything by it. He was huge. It wasn't his fault."

Flowers can't help but laugh when reminded of the story.

"He tells me that I fouled him pretty hard, but I don't recall that," he said. "I probably did because I remember having an attitude. He was a star player, of course, on their team. We're going against a team that has a star player in the eighth grade, like, I'm not going to let an eighth-grader shine and show out."

"So I probably did get tough on him a little bit," Flowers said. "I don't know if I fouled him too hard, but I could see myself having the mindset that you're not going to come up in here and ball on us like this. It was a pride thing."

Hard contact proved not to be an issue for Johnson, who eventually focused his attention on football. Albeit in a different sport, he managed to match his brother's accomplishments, winning three state titles and Alabama's Mr. Football award in 2014.

And like Ragland, Johnson stayed in state, going on to play collegiality at Auburn.

Prep 'pioneers'

Flowers and Stenberg didn't generate nearly the fanfare as their current teammates, partially because of where they attended school.

In that area, Ragland's Bob Jones High was king. But around that time, the booming population necessitated the need for more schools. Columbia, where Flowers went, opened in 2005, and it was far from a football powerhouse.

And Stenberg, was part of the first class to attend James Clemens High School, where the football program took a licking his freshman year, including a 72-0 loss to Bob Jones.

"Yeah, dude, that still haunts me." Stenberg said. "It still pisses me off, honestly."

Despite their individual talents, both Flowers and Stenberg flew under the radar during the recruiting process. Humorously, that's also what led to Flowers adopted nickname Trey.

"I'm a third," Flowers explained. "Throughout my recruiting process, I was Robert Flowers on Rivals. Robert Flowers had no stars, no picture, nothing. That was before Georgia Tech offered me, late in the game, where Robert Flowers was a no-star athlete.

"Once Georgia Tech offered me, like two weeks before signing day, the school only knew me as Trey because when they came to the school, my head coach was calling me Trey. They knew my dad was Robert, but didn't know my name was Robert, too. They thought my name was Trey.

"Georgia Tech, when they offered me, they announced they offered Trey Flowers a scholarship. Suddenly, Rivals creates a different account for Trey Flowers. Robert Flowers is still on there with no stars, a day later, Trey Flowers has three stars, committed to Georgia Tech."

Flowers ended up flipping to Arkansas late in the process, but Trey stuck. And in 2017, after winning the first of his two Super Bowls with the New England Patriots, Columbia retired his jersey.

"It was definitely special," Flowers said. "Just being from the area, that high school being new when I was coming through, it didn't really have a lot of tradition. For me to be a pioneer, I guess, for athletes going on and pursuing a professional career, it was special."

Stenberg, who has yet to play his first NFL snap after he was selected in the fourth round out of Kentucky in April's draft, hasn't reached that point at James Clemens, but he's well on his way. When you go to the school's Wikipedia page, he's amusingly listed as the school's only notable alumni.

That distinction likely will be short-lived. James Clemens isn't the laughingstock it was that first year, when Bob Jones steamrolled them. Stenberg's alma mater is now producing some top college recruits and the momentum of the crosstown rivalry, which is Madison's marquee event, has shifted to the newcomer.

"The stadium seats around 6,500-7,000," Finley said. "They'll be anywhere between 10,000 and 12,000 there. And it's evened out. James Clemens has won the last few games."

Giving back

That's a remarkable figure considering Madison only had a tick more than 4,000 residents 40 years ago. But the community is booming behind a massive tech job market. Based on current census projections, Finley said the city now has between 52,000 and 53,000 calling it home.

A lot of communities view themselves as a melting pot, but with Madison, as well as Huntsville — which has seen its population grow more than 1,000% in the past 70 years and is on track to become Alabama's biggest city in the next five — it's true. People come from all over the country to work for Redstone Arsenal, NASA and the numerous defense contractors that call the area home.

And while Stenberg's family has retreated a few miles north, to a more rural area in southern Tennessee to live out retired life on a cattle farm, the other three Lions have maintained a close connection with the community that reared them.

And outside of Stenberg, who is understandably still figuring things out having just begun his professional career, the Huntsville collective has been dedicated to giving back, particularly

to the youth, of the area.

Flowers established his foundation in 2019, shortly after signing with the Lions, and he's dove headfirst into helping out back home, donating \$15,000 to the Huntsville Inner City Learning Center. He's also established \$5,000 in annual scholarships for high school seniors and college undergrads, while donating more than 750 meals during the recent pandemic.

Johnson also established a foundation focused on the youth of Huntsville. The group's most-recent event provided backpacks, clothing and school supplies to 28 high school students.

Ragland runs an annual camp and always is looking for opportunities to personally mentor youth in the area.

"People know me just doing a camp every year, but that's just the tip of the iceberg of things I want to do. I have some things in my head that I want to put on paper and get it out there," Ragland said. "I just like helping kids. I love kids. And I love speaking to the younger generation, especially seeing kids how I was growing up, wanting to do something, wanting to play ball, whatever that is.

"I always tell them, you can do whatever you want to do. Don't let anybody stop you. I don't care who it is telling you that you can't do something. I don't care if it's your parents. As long as you put the effort in, you'll always reap something. If you don't put the effort in because someone told you not to, you're wrong for listening to that person. I don't care if it's your parents or not. If someone tells you you can't do something, you show them different."

Once the pandemic passes, all four players have talked about running a joint camp.

"I bet people would be coming from Mobile to go to that camp," Stenberg said. "It would be a cool experience."

It starts at home

Finley, Madison's mayor, marvels at the giving spirit of the four Lions and firmly believes the character of each was molded at home.

"To me, with any of those families, it really starts with the parents," Finley said. "Our parental involvement in this area is second to none. I won't say they're helicopter parents, but they are so focused on not only good grades, but good kids. All these four are good kids. It is so rewarding, as a mayor, to see.

"When we go into the schools, one of things we talk about is being a giver vs. a taker," Finley said. "At any level, from kindergarten to 12th grade, when I talk to them, I tell them, 'You can make a difference. You should make a difference. And each of us has a different way to do that.' To see these kids setting up foundations, having the camps that they have, it's heartwarming. They're not just taking their God-given ability and selfishly exploiting it, they're putting it back into the community. As a leader, that's huge."

Not surprisingly, all four players speak glowingly about the role their parents played, particularly the hard work and discipline hammered home by their fathers. Flowers' dad ran a construction company. Stenberg's served two decades in the military before transitioning into civilian contracting. Johnson's runs a gym focused on training top basketball talent from the area. And Ragland's dad, a self-employed contractor, might have been the toughest of them all.

"Everyone knows my dad was tough on me," Ragland said. "I'm my dad's only child. My mom was married before she met my dad. He always made sure I did the little things right, kept my nose clean and he was there every step of the way. Every time I wanted to do something, and I told him I wanted to do it, he was right there pushing me."

"My dad has always been a great father," Ragland continued. "A lot of people didn't like his style raising me, but who cares? It worked. It worked for me to keep my nose clean, to stay out of trouble. He made sure I didn't hang around the wrong people and he always made sure I understood the opportunity I had in front of me to become what I wanted to be. I'm so thankful for him and being who I had in my corner."

No flash, just substance

When you ask all four players, as well as Finley, what people from the region have in common, you get different, but similar answers. The mayor sees a welcoming community chock full of problem solvers. Stenberg highlights the area's humility and Flowers sees resiliency and toughness.

Johnson, ties it all together with a little from column A and a little from column B.

"When you look at all the people that made it, there's one thing that always sticks out — all of us, I won't say sound the same, but we have that same mentality," he said. "We keep it low, go to work, do our work, do our job, do what we need to do to be good at our jobs and that's it. We're not always the flashiest players or flashiest people, but we love football and love to do what we do and we love to go to work and be tough on the field."

That approach plays in Detroit as well as anywhere, where coaches and players have long sought to embody the blue-collar, grind-it-out mentality of the city. The Detroit Pistons built the "Goin' to Work" championship-winning brand around lunch pails and hard hats.

Yes, the four paths that brought Ragland, Flowers, Johnson and Stenberg to Detroit were all unique. But where those paths have intersected feels just right.

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